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NEW GENERATION OF VICTORS: NARRATING THE NATION IN RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE, 2012–2019

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Abstract: After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, many proposed that this state-generated, ethnically loaded “nationalist boost” enhanced the state’s legitimacy by replacing the previous social contract between the Russian state and the people. This article argues for a more nuanced understanding of nationalism in contemporary Russia by asking how exactly the state leadership has portrayed the Russian nation in 2012–2019. Analyzing presidential speeches in this period, the article traces three distinctive but closely interconnected narratives of “Russianness”: the narrative of the victorious nation; the narrative of the moral nation; and the narrative of the multinational but ethnically hierarchical nation.

After Vladimir Putin began his third term as Russian President in 2012, and in particular following the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in the spring of 2014, media and, to some extent, scholarly analyses have turned to nationalism to explain the seemingly abrupt change in Russian

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politics.¹ However, nationalism as a label does not sufficiently illuminate the self-presentation of the Russian state because it is a concept of several—even conflicting—meanings that often remain undefined. Moreover, the purely instrumentalist interpretation of the concept fails to cover the full complexity of nationalism as a source of legitimacy for a political actor. In order to add an original and empirically tested argument to the scholarly discussion, the current article sets out to analyze references made to the nation in presidential discourse over the past eight years, that is, after the “wave of nationalism” hit the shore. It explains how the Russian state leadership has formulated its nationalist argument in 2012–2019 by asking what constitutes “Russianness” in the narratives produced by the president, and who, on those accounts, belongs to the nation? With the help of the scholarly literature, I contextualize this argument by discussing key policy shifts and societal attitudes related to the narratives.

The past and present of Russian nationalism(s) remains a well-studied theme. Scholars have focused, among other topics, on ethnic Russian nationalism and radical nationalist movements in Russian history,² state nationalism as a consolidating policy,³ and the role of memory politics and media in the nation-building process.⁴ In many of these studies, an overarching theme has been the tension between state nationalism and “bottom-up” nationalism. Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø, leaders of the extensive research project NEORUSS, note that “a ‘nationalist turn’ in Russian state policy makes sense only if we can also assume that there exists a pool of nationalist sentiment in the Russian population the rulers believe they can tap into,”⁵ a view endorsed in this article. According to

¹ See, for example, Richard Arnold. “Surveys Show Russian Nationalism Is On the Rise.” *The Washington Post*. May 30, 2016. At <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/30/surveys-show-russian-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-this-explains-a-lot-about-the-countrys-foreign-and-domestic-politics/>, accessed September 17, 2019; Charles Clover. “The Return of Russian Nationalism.” *Financial Times*. October 13, 2017. At <https://www.ft.com/content/edb595d8-aeba-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>, accessed September 17, 2019.

² Robert Horvath. 2005. *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent: Dissidents, Democratisation and Radical Nationalism in Russia*. Oxon: Routledge; Thomas Parland. 2005. *The Extreme Nationalist Threat in Russia: The Growing Influence of Western Rightist Ideas*. Oxon: Routledge.

³ Yitzhak M. Brudny. 1998. *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Marlène Laruelle. 2009. *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ Olga Malinova. 2015. *Aktual'noe proshloe. Simvolicheskaya politika vlastvuiushchei elity i dilemmy rossiiskoi identichnosti*. [Current Past. The Symbolic Policy of the Ruling Elite and the Dilemmas of Russian Identity.] Moscow: ROSSPEN; Olga Malinova. 2017. “Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin.” In Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, eds., *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies; Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz. 2015. *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*. Oxon: Routledge.

⁵ Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. 2018. “Introduction.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkis-

Luke March, in order to study nationalism in Russia in a holistic manner, research considering both the “ideational influence of nationalism and policy contents of its proponents” is needed.⁶ The “influence” of the narratives remains outside the scope of this article, but the way in which these narratives are constructed reflects the state actors’ reasoning as well as their assumptions about popular moods.

The term “social contract” has often been used when analyzing regime legitimacy in post-Soviet Russia.⁷ The contract was seriously tested in 2011–2012, when tens of thousands of Russian citizens gathered to protest against Vladimir Putin’s plans to return to the presidency. As a result, after Putin’s third term as president began in 2012, the state authorities not only limited possibilities for political contention in the public space and in the media but also sought to appeal to the conservative part of the society by promoting traditional, “spiritual-moral” values as the core of Russian national identity. Simultaneously, efforts to connect these values to national security intensified.⁸ This change in politics, often described as an “authoritarian” or “conservative turn,”⁹ serves as the start of this study’s time frame: it focuses on state nationalism after that turn, which encompasses another watershed, the annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014. The annexation created a wave of patriotism that many interpreted as a new form of the social contract: on this view, instead of economic security, the people were given a “boost” of nationalist great-poweriness in exchange for loyalty to the state in a time of a crisis.¹⁰ However, “increasing” nationalism in order to enhance the legitimacy of the incumbent is a risky strategy, the potential success of which does not necessarily endure.

Moreover, as Henry E. Hale et al. argue, Russia’s political system

rud, eds., *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 6–7.

⁶ Luke March. 2018. “Nationalism.” In Andrei P. Tsygankov, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*. London and New York: Routledge Handbooks, 95.

⁷ Aleksey Makarkin. 2011. “The Russian Social Contract and Regime Legitimacy.” *International Affairs* 87: 6: 1459–74.

⁸ Jardar Østbo. 2017. “Securitizing ‘Spiritual-Moral Values’ in Russia.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33: 3: 200–216, 202.

⁹ Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner. 2019. “Dilemmas and Paradoxes of Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Introduction.” In Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 3–35; Magnus Feldmann and Honorata Mazepus. 2018. “State-Society Relations and the Sources of Support for the Putin Regime: Bridging Political Culture and Social Contract Theory.” *East European Politics* 34:1: 57–76.

¹⁰ Emil A. Pain and Lev D. Gudkov. 2014. “Beseda na temu: ‘V ozhidanii chuda: rossiiskoe obshchestvo posle krymskikh sobytii.’ [Discussion on the Topic: ‘Waiting for a Miracle: Russian Society after the Crimean Events’]. *Politicheskaya kontseptologiya* 1; Eduard Ponarin and Mihail Komin. 2018. “The Russian Elite’s Imperial Nationalism and the Russian Society: The Emergence of a Grand Consensus.” *Sociology Compass* 12: 12; Yuri Teper. 2018. “Kremlin’s Post-2012 National Policies: Encountering the Merits and Perils of Identity-Based Social Contract.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *Russia Before and After Crimea. Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 68.

should be understood as inherently dynamic. The Kremlin employs both structural and ideational improvisation, and this process by no means reached its end after the “Crimean consensus.”¹¹ In a similar vein, Magnus Feldmann and Honorata Mazepus point out that the social contract can be re-negotiated.¹² As of the time of writing, it is clear that even if the majority of Russians still support the annexation of Crimea, the “patriotic boost” no longer serves as a significant source of legitimacy for the current leadership. Indeed, challenges related to state legitimacy have become even more acute in recent years, as socio-economic problems, corruption, and electoral fraud have triggered widespread protests. In the near future, the repercussions of the global Covid-19 pandemic will exacerbate these challenges. The process of “re-negotiating” the social contract between the state and the people is not over in contemporary Russia; by analyzing the narratives of the nation produced by the political leadership, we can gain some insight into the forms it may take in the future.

Political Narratives as a Way to Generate Meaning

The article draws on critical nationalism studies that treat the nation as a result of a deliberate construction process. As Yitzhak M. Brudny points out, shared beliefs about a nation’s distinctive origins, culture, and history, among other things, are not immutable.¹³ These beliefs are also subject to manipulation. To a large extent, the construction of a nation is innately political, which is why I have found John Breuilly’s concept of nationalism as an argument useful. The nationalist argument consists of three assumptions: that there exists a nation with an explicit character; that the interests of this nation take priority over those of other nations; and that the nation must be as independent as possible.¹⁴ Thus, I approach state-produced narratives on “Russianness” as a means of formulating and defending the nationalist argument. It is important to study this process because it has real political implications: nationalist discourses create the conditions for domestic and foreign policy decisions and maintain boundaries that recognize those who belong and exclude the Others.¹⁵

Nationalist ideologies, like any ideologies, aim to become “common sense”—unnoticed, naturalized knowledge. This process takes place via language. Political actors often rely on the narrative form, since it is embraced by the public as a natural way of thinking.¹⁶ This article adopts

¹¹ Henry E. Hale, Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov. 2019. “Russia’s Regime-on-the-Move.” *Russian Politics* 4, 168–95.

¹² Feldmann and Mazepus, “State-Society Relations,” 66.

¹³ Brudny, *Reinventing Russia*, 5.

¹⁴ John Breuilly. 1994. *Nationalism and the State*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2–3.

¹⁵ Vera Tolz. 2001. *Russia: Inventing the Nation*. London: Arnold Publishers, 236.

¹⁶ Shaul R. Shenhav. 2006. “Political Narratives and Political Reality.” *International Political*

a minimal definition of narrative, understanding it as a socially produced account of events that contains aspects of temporality and causality.¹⁷ Narratives are means to tell about experiences of the past and link them to the present in a meaningful way, so whether the narratives are “true” is less important than whether they are embraced by the people.¹⁸ Public narratives of the nation, produced by the political leadership, are understood as stories told to the people about their shared characteristics that emphasize selected historical continua.

For the purposes of this article, a set of 35 presidential addresses from the years 2012–2019 was collected for close reading. The selection includes the president’s annual addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,¹⁹ which have served, since 2014, as strategic planning documents for the country;²⁰ addresses to the annual Valdai discussion forum (from the year 2013 onwards, when forum discussions became public); greetings at the annual Victory Day Parade; the speech given on the day of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the brief commemorative remarks made on the anniversary of the annexation in each subsequent year; and speeches delivered at the festivities for the Day of National Unity. The material encompasses both speeches outlining Russian state policy and addresses of a more ceremonial character that were given on occasions emphasizing national unity. The criteria for selection were that the speeches were widely reported in the domestic media and served a slightly different function from any other speech in the sample. Political leaders shape their message to their audience, so the goal was to map the main contents of the narratives that emerge in various settings. Russia’s political system is highly president-centric both in legislative terms and in practice, and in this article, the president is understood as the embodiment of the highest political power in Russia.

In order to answer the main research question—how the Russian state leadership has formulated the nationalist argument in 2012–2019—the primary textual material was subjected to qualitative content analysis. The primary material was read in Russian, searching for specific references to the Russian nation (*russkii/rossiiskii narod/natsiia*), to “us” as a nation, or to “our” national character. Most often those were excerpts in which the president described “us” Russians in a certain way, portrayed the Russian *Science Review* 27: 3: 245–62, 250; Edwin Bacon. 2012. “Public Political Narratives: Developing a Neglected Source through the Exploratory Case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev era.” *Political Studies* 60: 768–86, 768.

¹⁷ Anna De Fina. 2017. “Narrative Analysis.” In Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 234.

¹⁸ Shenhav, “Political Narratives,” 246.

¹⁹ In December 2017, the presidential administration postponed the address until March 2018.

²⁰ 2014. *Federal’nyi zakon No 172-FZ ‘O strategicheskoi planirovanii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Federal Law “On the Strategic planning of the Russian Federation”], At <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/38630>, accessed November 19, 2019, chapter 3: 11/3.

nation in general terms or in comparison to its Others, or depicted the history of the nation. In analyzing the references, words and expressions that appeared particularly frequently were taken into account. However, no statistics were produced, nor were the meaning units quantitatively grouped, because it was possible to process the material manually. The references were organized into thematic categories depending on the temporal and causal ways in which the nation was defined. This produced three distinct narratives. This is not to say that these are the only possible narratives, nor that they are consistent and univocal throughout time, but taken together, they portray the explicit character of the Russian nation as expressed by state leadership.

Narrative of the Multinational Nation

In post-Soviet Russia, striking a balance between (broadly understood) ethnic and civic nation-building strategies has been a key challenge. From the authorities' viewpoint, Russia's ethno-federal structure has complicated civic nation-building, but ethnic variants cannot be openly endorsed because of their potential to encourage ethnic tensions, separatism, and disintegration.²¹ Partly for this reason, Boris Yeltsin, despite his emphasis on the civic vocabulary and the interpretation of Russians as "a multinational nation" (*mnogonatsional'nyi narod*), took an imperial view of ethnic Russians as the most important, "state-forming" (*gosudarstvenno-brasuyushchey*) nation of the country.²² These concepts feature in several key documents, such as the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation and the 1996 Concept on Nationalities policy.²³ As Oxana Shevel shows, the ambivalence between the concept of multinationality and the "special role" of ethnic Russians both in the Russian Federation and in the former Soviet Union persisted during Putin's and Dmitri Medvedev's presidential terms.²⁴

Indeed, Putin has emphasized "multinationality"—in the sense of ethnic and confessional diversity—as one of the most consistent characteristics of the Russian nation since the beginning of 2012, when he published a series of newspaper articles as part of his presidential campaign. In one

²¹ See, for example, Oxana Shevel. 2011. "Russian Nation-Building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 63: 2: 179–202.

²² The view of Russians as a state-forming nation gained popularity in the Russian Empire by the beginning of the twentieth century. Aleksei Miller. 2012. "Istoriia poniatiia natsiia v Rossii." [History of the Concept of Nation in Russia]. In Aleksei Miller et al., eds., *Poniatiia o Rossii: K istoricheskoi semantike imperskogo perioda* [Concepts on Russia: On Historical Semantics of the Imperial Period]. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 7–49, 48.

²³ Garant-Internet. n.d. *Constitution of the Russian Federation*, At <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>, accessed November 11, 2019; J. Paul Goode. 2019. "Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence: The Failure of Civic Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Russia." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35: 2: 140–160, 149.

²⁴ Shevel, "Russian Nation-Building," 189–90.

of the texts, focusing explicitly on nationality politics, Putin explained his vision of multinationality as a crucial part of Russian statehood: “Historical Russia is not an ethnic state, nor is it an American ‘melting pot’ [...] Russia developed in the course of centuries as a multinational state.”²⁵

In the same article, Putin stressed the view of ethnic Russians as a state-forming nation whose mission is to unite the civilization. Later in 2012, Putin again presented multinationality as an inherent characteristic both of the Russian state and its people—it is Russia’s “strength and beauty.”²⁶ At the Valdai forum in 2013, Putin explained that “polycultural” and multi-ethnic features (*polikul’turnost’*, *polietnichnost’*) live in “our historical consciousness” and that questioning “our multi-ethnic character [...] means that we are starting to destroy our genetic code.”²⁷

With these references to multinationality, the temporal and causal aspects of a certain narrative begin to take shape. In an article written for the presidential campaign, Putin described the origins of the Day of the National Unity, a national holiday to commemorate the end of the “Time of Troubles”—or the Polish invasion of Moscow—in 1612, stating that it celebrates a moment when estates and nationalities realized themselves as one people. He added: “We can rightfully consider this holiday the birthday of our civic nation (*rozhdeniya nashey grazhdanskoy natsii*).”²⁸ Putin returned to this theme on the Day of National Unity in 2014:

Having formed a people’s militia, they [people of different nationalities and religions] liberated Moscow from invaders [...]. More than four centuries have passed since then, but the dramatic events of that time remain an eternal historical lesson for us, a warning for all generations, a rule for us.²⁹

Throughout the period under study, multinationality recurs as a “historical” characteristic of the Russian nation, often connected to loyalty to the Motherland and patriotism. The combination of these features, the

²⁵ Vladimir Putin. 2012. “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros” [Russia: The National Question]. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 23, 2012, At http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html, accessed September 4, 2019. Translations from Russian by the author.

²⁶ Vladimir Putin. 2012. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 12, 2012, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>, accessed November 11, 2019.

²⁷ Vladimir Putin. 2013. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai.’” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*. September 19, 2013, At <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>, accessed November 11, 2019.

²⁸ Putin, “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros.”

²⁹ Vladimir Putin. 2014. “Priem po sluchaiu Dnia narodnogo edinstva” [Reception of the Day of the National Unity]. *Kremlin.ru*. November 4, 2014, At <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46916>, accessed November 11, 2019.

narrative suggests, has ensured Russia's survival in the times of conflict. As will be discussed further in this article, presidential discourse often deploys parallels between events in the past and those in the present. The Day of National Unity is a case in point. Edwin Bacon notes that when the new holiday was established in 2005, films and television documentaries likened the "Time of Troubles" in the seventeenth century to the 1990s in Russia: "The implication was that just as the Romanov dynasty brought long-term stability in 1612, so the Putin regime brought long-term stability after the chaos of the Yeltsin years."³⁰ Thus, one of the main narratives of "Russianness" reads as follows: the historical unity of the multinational Russian nation was born in 1612, when the people organized to fight the foreign enemy. Since then, the unity of the multinational nation has been tested in several conflicts in which there was an external threat, including the Second World War, but it has persisted and remains Russia's strength to this day. The inherent multinational character of the Russian nation guarantees the harmonious coexistence of various nationalities within the Russian state and makes it unique in relation to other nations, such as the Western European nations.

Edwin Bacon describes subplots as alternative interpretations told by the regime itself. They provide flexibility to the actual narrative, as they can be employed simultaneously, but also allow future developments in alternative directions.³¹ Bacon's concept of a subplot helps to analyze the "unique role" of ethnic Russians within the narrative of the multinational nation, often explained in the presidential discourse as a feature uniting "the civilization":

We must treasure the unique experience passed on to us by our forefathers. For centuries—from the very beginning—Russia developed as a multi-ethnic nation, a state-civilisation held together by the Russian people (*skreplennoe russkim narodom*), the Russian language and Russian culture, which are native to all of us, which unite us and prevent us from dissolving in this diverse world.³²

Thus, the narrative is presented as ethnically inclusive, but it simultaneously embraces the idea of a certain type of ethnic hierarchy. In other words, all nationalities belong to the narrative of the multinational nation, but ethnic Russians have a special—that is, more important—role. The subplot within the narrative of the multinational nation stresses the decisive

³⁰ Bacon, "Public Political Narratives," 779.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 780–81.

³² Putin, "Poslanie prezidenta."

role of ethnic Russians in the religious and cultural history of the country. In contemporary contexts, the view of Russian ethnicity as “first among equals” has been reinforced both by representatives of the establishment and by the country’s highest-level leadership.³³

Despite the emphasis on multinationality, the state apparatus has tested alternative approaches as well. In May 2012, as Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz have shown, an anti-migrant campaign began on federal TV: state-aligned broadcasters portrayed immigration, particularly Islamic immigration, as a threat to Russia’s sovereignty, security, and identity.³⁴ By the end of 2013, the Kremlin-endorsed campaign had contributed to outbreaks of violent radical nationalism on the streets of Moscow suburbs, and the people expressed distrust in the state authorities’ ability to handle the situation. Xenophobic attitudes toward migrants were at a record high.³⁵ During the campaign, Putin did not stress migration-related questions, but in October 2013, following an outbreak of violence, he addressed the issue in a speech to the Federal Assembly:

It [interethnic tension] is not provoked by representatives of particular nationalities, but by people devoid of culture and respect for traditions, both their own and those of others. [...] Together we must rise to the challenge; we must protect interethnic peace and thus the unity of our society, the unity and integrity of the Russian state.³⁶

By the end of 2013, the anti-migration campaign on TV had been toned down, while control of radical nationalist groups had increased. The Sochi Winter Olympics, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in Ukraine shifted the media’s attention elsewhere, affecting public opinion: xenophobic attitudes began to decrease after spring 2014.³⁷

The most significant shift in this narrative took place in 2014. Until then, the emphasis on historical multinationality had outweighed the

³³ Helge Blakkisrud. 2016. “Blurring the Boundary between Civic and Ethnic: The Kremlin’s New Approach to National Identity under Putin’s Third Term.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 254–55; Hutchings and Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race*, 223.

³⁴ Hutchings and Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race*, 239–40.

³⁵ Karina Pipiya. 2016. *Intolerantnost’ i ksenofobiia* [Intolerance and Xenophobia]. At <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/11/intolerantnost-i-ksenofobiya>, accessed June 4, 2019.

³⁶ Vladimir Putin. 2013. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 12, 2013, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>, accessed November 11, 2019.

³⁷ Levada Center. 2016. *Soiuzniki i ‘vragi’ Rossii. Evropeiskaia integratsiia* [Allies and ‘Enemies’ of Russia. European Integration], At <http://www.levada.ru/2016/06/02/13400/>, accessed June 4, 2019.

references to ethnic Russianness in the presidential discourse. But in his speeches dealing with Crimea, Putin highlighted the ethnic connotation instead. In his March 2014 address, held after the referendum, he stressed “Russianness” as the decisive characteristic of the peninsula, saying, for example, that the residents of Crimea have always regarded it as “originally Russian land (*iskonno russkaya zemlya*).”³⁸ In his speech to the Federal Assembly later that year, Putin reiterated that “our people” (*nashi lyudi*) are living in Crimea—and stated that the main motivation for the annexation was to defend their rights. Putin also referred to the Grand Prince of Kiev, Vladimir the Great, who was baptized there, and described Sevastopol as a holy place for “all of us.”³⁹

By linking the nation to the Orthodox tradition and constantly referring to it using a term with an ethnic connotation, Putin emphasized ethnic Russianness as the key frame for the annexation. Yuri Teper interpreted this as “a remarkable ethno-national shift” in the official identity discourse: after a long and rather stable emphasis on statist nation-building, the annexation of Crimea marked the moment that the nation became the primary reference point for constructing Russianness.⁴⁰ But in the years that followed, the “ethno-national” tone no longer dominated Putin’s speeches. Instead, the historical multinationality of the Russian nation figured prominently in presidential discourse until the very end of the period under study.⁴¹ Sofia Tipaldou and Philipp Casula note that “the people” to whom state actors appealed in 2014 was “a much more unstable, slippery, and problematic construct” than, for example, during the Chechen war, because Ukrainians are considered a brotherly nation. They posit that for this reason, the official discourse utilized “the populist and inclusionary elements” of nationalism.⁴² Moreover, I would suggest that the emphasis on ethnic Russianness as a historically “unifying” feature of the nation has served as a co-existing plot within the narrative of the multinational nation, both during and after the annexation of Crimea.

In this regard, the conceptual choices are telling. For example,

³⁸ Vladimir Putin. 2014(b). “Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii.” [Address by the President of Russian Federation]. *Kremlin.ru*. March 18, 2014, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, accessed November 11, 2019.

³⁹ Vladimir Putin. 2014(c). “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 4, 2014, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>, accessed November 11, 2019.

⁴⁰ Yuri Teper. 2016. “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32:4: 378–96, 392–393.

⁴¹ Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Priem po sluchayu Dnia narodnogo edinstva” [Reception of the Day of the National Unity]. *Kremlin.ru*. November 4, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59043>, accessed November 4, 2019; Vladimir Putin. 2019. “Priem po sluchayu Dnia narodnogo edinstva” [Reception of the Day of the National Unity]. *Kremlin.ru*. November 4, 2019, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61963>, accessed November 4, 2019.

⁴² Sofia Tipaldou and Philipp Casula. 2019. “Russian Nationalism Shifting: The Role of Populism Since the Annexation of Crimea.” *Demokratizatsiya*, 27:3 (Summer 2019): 351.

throughout his Crimea speech, Putin deployed the term *russkii*.⁴³ Marlène Laruelle has noted that the widespread interpretation that *russkii* refers to linguistic and ethnic Russians, whereas *rossiiskii* encompasses citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnicity, is actually too narrow of a view on the matter. She posits that the term *russkii* reinforces the historical unity of the Eastern Slavs and emphasizes the “messianic” destiny of Russia.⁴⁴ Kolstø and Blakkisrud suggest that by using the two concepts interchangeably, the Kremlin wishes to eradicate the difference between *russkii* and *rossiiskii*, and thus make Russia into a more “normal” nation-state.⁴⁵ In the material of this study, Putin does not show sensitivity to these concepts in the sense of using them systematically. The motivation for the inconsistency (and the extent to which it is a deliberate choice) can be debated, but it is clear that *russkii* in the presidential discourse is a cultural-linguistic term rather than a narrow ethno-national one:

I recall one of my meetings with veterans. There were people of different nationalities: Tatars, Ukrainians, Georgians, and Russians, of course. One of the veterans, not a Russian by nationality, said, “For the whole world, we are one people, we are Russians (*my odin narod, my russkie*).” That’s how it was during the war, and that’s how it has always been.⁴⁶

The identity discourses concerning the annexation of Crimea mostly targeted domestic audiences.⁴⁷ Yet the narrative of the multinational nation also has a strong foreign policy aspect. In the presidential discourse, *multinationality* is a sustainable policy, whereas the Western alternative, *multiculturalism*, is condemned. As early as January 2012, Putin stated that multiculturalism leads to a situation where people risk losing their national identity, and thus portends a crisis for European nation-states. He went on to say that Russia’s situation is “principally different.”⁴⁸ Five years later, he stated that “on a global scale, the creation of mono-ethnic states (*mononatsional’noe gosudarstvo*) is not a panacea against possible conflicts, but just the opposite.”⁴⁹ Putin portrayed the mono-national state, which is prone to

⁴³ Putin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta.”

⁴⁴ Marlène Laruelle. 2016. “Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why Russkii is Not a Sign of Ethnonationalism.” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 416, At <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/node/8218>, accessed November 19, 2019.

⁴⁵ Kolstø and Blakkisrud, “Introduction,” 9.

⁴⁶ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

⁴⁷ Teper, “Official Russian Identity,” 393.

⁴⁸ Putin, “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros.”

⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin. 2017. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’.” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*. October 19, 2017, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>, accessed November 11, 2019.

conflicts, as an antithesis to the multinational state, which today's Russia represents. In short, the multiculturalism adopted by the Western countries is perceived in the presidential discourse as a failure, whereas the multinationality of the Russian state results from a centuries-old tradition of "ensuring diversity in unity" and is, therefore, more durable and balanced.

During the period under study, a political attempt to "clarify" the key concept of the narrative of the multinational nation surfaced. In a meeting of the Council for Ethnic Relations in 2016, the president endorsed the idea of drafting a law on the Russian nation (*zakon o rossiiskoi natsii*).⁵⁰ One of the initiators of the idea, Vyacheslav Mikhailov, explained that a clear definition would reduce confusion stemming from two possible interpretations of the concept of nation (*natsiia*): a civic entity and an ethnicity.⁵¹ Both Mikhailov and another key figure behind the initiative, Valeri Tishkov, served as nationalities minister in the 1990s.⁵² An amendment they pursued was adopted in December 2018. Today, the Strategy of Nationalities Policy defines "the multinational people of the Russian Federation (the Russian nation)" as "a community of free equal citizens of the Russian Federation of various ethnic, religious, social and other affiliations, with civic consciousness (*obladayushchih grazhdanskim samosoznaniem*)."⁵³ It remains to be seen whether this distinctively civic but still rather vague definition will affect the actual nationalities policy, especially since the state authorities have simultaneously adopted increasingly assimilative measures regarding, for instance, minority languages.⁵⁴

The popularity of the narrative of the multinational nation remains difficult to assess, partly because the fear of separatism has constrained the public discussion on ethnic minorities' rights or inter-ethnic tensions within society. Nor have those topics been covered in presidential addresses since the end of 2013. Recent opinion polls demonstrate a rise in xenophobic attitudes among Russians after 2017,⁵⁵ which portends future challenges

⁵⁰ 2016. "Zasedanie Soveta po mezhnatsional'nym otnosheniiam" [Meeting of the Council for Ethnic Relations]. *Kremlin.ru*. October 31, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53173>, accessed May 5, 2020.

⁵¹ Georgii Neyaskin. 2018. "'Ni odna strana ne mozhet bez ideologii.' Interv'iu s avtorom idei uzakonit' rossiiskuiu natsiiu." ['No Country Can Be without an Ideology.' An Interview with an Author of the Idea to Legalize the Russian Nation]. *Republic.ru*, November 2, 2018, At <https://republic.ru/posts/75657>, accessed May 5, 2020.

⁵² Goode, "Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence," 150–52.

⁵³ 2018. "Podpisan Ukaz o vnesenii izmenenii v Strategiiu gosudarstvennoi natsional'noi politiki na period do 2025 goda" [A Decree to Amend the Strategy of Nationalities Policy until 2025 was Signed]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 7, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/59348>, accessed May 5, 2020, chapter 6.

⁵⁴ Konstantin Zamyatin. 2016. "Russian Political Regime Change and Strategies of Diversity Management: From a Multinational Federation towards a Nation-State." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 15: 1: 19–49, 44–45.

⁵⁵ Levada Center. 2019. *Monitoring ksenofobskikh nastroyenii* [Monitoring of the xenophobic attitudes] At <https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/18/monitoring-ksenofobskikh-nastroyenij-2/>, ac-

to the narrative of the multinational nation. Stressing the primacy of ethnic Russianness may have unwanted effects because of the lack of agreement regarding to whom it actually refers. The simultaneous process of redefining key concepts in official policy documents according to distinctively civic language suggests that the existing conceptual and strategic ambiguity will prevail.

Narrative of the Victorious Nation

As the narrative of the multinational nation shows, the idea of a shared past helps to define the explicit character of the Russian nation. Referring to common history is a universal way to enhance feelings of belonging within a nation, hence why history is universally used—and abused—by politicians for nation-building purposes. In post-Soviet Russia, all state leaders have had to overcome the country's complex role as the successor of the USSR, on one hand, and the absence of any widely-accepted “grand narrative,” on the other. In the early 1990s, narratives of the past were harnessed to legitimate reforms, and the contrast between the totalitarian past and the democratic present was thus stressed. However, in early 2000s, the official narratives adopted the idea of a “thousand-year-long” Russian history to replace the perception of “old” and “new” Russia. At this stage, as Olga Malinova puts it, “the critical attitude to the Soviet past was replaced by its selective appropriation.”⁵⁶

The year 2012, dubbed the “Year of History,” marked an intensification of political uses of the past in presidential discourse. According to Malinova, the number of historical references in the Russian presidential discourse began to grow significantly after 2012, when allusions to pre-Soviet Russian history also became more commonplace. The role of history in society gained considerable attention: new museums, projects, and policies were introduced. In December, Putin signed a decree to found Russia's War History Society, headed by Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii.⁵⁷ In February of the following year, Putin presented the idea of a single history textbook to canonize history education, an idea that eventually evolved into a Unified History Concept to guide history teaching in the country.⁵⁸ Today, history features strongly in Russian political discourse; the ruling elite considers the construction of the past to be one of its political tasks.⁵⁹

In his speech to the Federal Assembly in December 2012, Putin reminded the audience of “the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, [...] we have a common, continuous
cessed November 19, 2019.

⁵⁶ Malinova, “Political Uses,” 45–46.

⁵⁷ Order #1710, At <https://rvio.histrf.ru/officially/ukaz-1710>, accessed April 28, 2020.

⁵⁸ Nikolai Gorodetskii. “Kontseptsiiia odna, uchebnikov mnogo.” August 27, 2014, At https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2014/08/27_a_6191721.shtml, accessed September 15, 2020.

⁵⁹ Malinova, *Aktual'noe proshloe*, 130–36; Malinova, “Political Uses,” 47, 50–53.

history spanning over one thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development.”⁶⁰ At the Valdai forum in 2013, Putin stated that “we must be proud of our history, and we have things to be proud of. Our entire, uncensored history must be a part of Russian identity.”⁶¹ Despite these words, the state leadership remains extremely selective in its use of the shared past.

Undoubtedly the most important event in the shared past of the Russian nation is the victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War, which in Russia is known as the Great Patriotic War. The victory has become the formative event in the history of the nation: it made “us” what “we” are today. This view was expressed as early as 2010, when president Dmitri Medvedev stated on the 65th anniversary of the Victory that “that war made us a strong nation.”⁶² The political myth of the war connects sacrifice and heroism, for without one, there cannot be the other. On Victory Day (May 9), celebrations take place across the country, and a military parade is held on Red Square in Moscow. In 2015, the 70th anniversary of the victory, the parade was the largest ever in terms of participants and military equipment. No significant scaling-down has taken place in subsequent years. In the summer of 2019, the presidential administration announced that the year 2020 would be a “Year of Memory and Glory” to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the victory.⁶³ Referring to this, Putin reminded listeners in November 2019 that “we prepare to celebrate our sacred date (*svyashchennuiu dlia nas datu*).”⁶⁴ Public celebrations of the victory, as well as the vast resources channeled to state-associated historical organizations, museums, and events in recent years, keep the shared past vividly present in society.

Since 2012, Putin has ended his Victory Day speech with the greeting “Glory to the victorious nation!” every year except 2016 and 2018. Joseph Stalin coined the term “victorious nation” (*narod-pobeditel*), or “the nation that wins/has won,” on the very first Victory Day in 1945. In the contemporary context, it stresses the victory as an eternal characteristic of the nation. For example, in May 2013, Putin described the victory as “the sound of a great bell that celebrates life without war, a sacred symbol of loyalty to our Motherland which lives in each of us.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

⁶¹ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

⁶² Dmitri Medvedev. “Dorogie veterany!” [Dear Veterans!], *Kremlin.ru*, May 9, 2010, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/7685>, accessed May 5, 2020.

⁶³ “V Rossii 2020 god stanet Godom pamyati i slavy” [In Russia, the Year 2020 Will Become a Year of Memory and Glory], *RIA Novosti*, July 8, 2019, At <https://ria.ru/20190708/1556323142.html>, accessed November 20, 2019.

⁶⁴ Putin, “Priem po sluchaiu” (2019).

⁶⁵ Vladimir Putin. 2013. “Voennyy parad na Krasnoi ploshadi” [Military Parade on the Red Square], *Kremlin.ru*, May 9, 2013, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18089>, accessed November 11, 2019.

One of the key shifts in the discourse of the shared past takes place after 2014, when the “victorious nation” started to function as a parallel between the past and present. Olga Malinova has noted that in the context of international conflict, “the triumphalist narrative of the Great Patriotic War acquired a new dimension: it came to be used as a marker of post-Soviet imperialist identity and became closely associated with pro-Putin ‘patriotic’ attitudes.”⁶⁶ My findings suggest that this shift was reinforced in the presidential discourse by stressing the similarities between “Russianness” past and present. For instance, in 2018, Putin described those marching on the Red Square parade as the “new generation of victors”⁶⁷ (*novoe pokolenie pobeditelei*). In this way, the presidential discourse suggests that the memory of the war is “alive” and that the concept of the victorious nation also describes the nation living today.

Another way to mark this connection was the adoption of a minute of silence at the Victory Day ceremony in 2015. The gesture is primarily dedicated to the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, but Putin’s formulation connects them with contemporary war veterans by mentioning “those who did not return from the war.”⁶⁸ According to Andrei Kolesnikov, the Kremlin pursues a “myth of permanent war” and borrows the Soviet discourse of a “fair, defensive, victorious, and preventive” war to frame Russia’s current wars.⁶⁹ This becomes evident in Putin’s speeches after 2014. In the official foreign policy narrative, Russia’s military actions have always been and still are of a defensive nature.⁷⁰ For example, when explaining the dynamics of the new world order at the Valdai meeting in 2014, Putin reminded the audience that “we did not start this.”⁷¹ In September 2015, Russia embarked on military intervention in Syria, dubbed first and foremost a “preventive” action in the war against terrorism. Likewise, on Victory Day in 2016, prefacing his comments on terrorism, Putin said that “history lessons teach us that peace on this planet is not established by itself.” In the speech, the linkage between the soldiers of today and the soldiers of the past is clear (although Putin does not explicitly mention Syria): “Our soldiers and commanders have proven that they are worthy successors of

⁶⁶ Malinova, “Political Uses,” 46.

⁶⁷ Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Voennyi parad na Krasnoi ploshchadi” [Military Parade on the Red Square]. *Kremlin.ru*, May 9, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57436>, accessed September 10, 2019.

⁶⁸ This part of the speech has been similar in 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019.

⁶⁹ Andrei Kolesnikov. 2016. *Do Russians Want War?*, At <http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/14/do-russians-want-war/j1u8>, accessed May 3, 2019.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniui” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*, March 1, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/56957>, accessed November 20, 2019.

⁷¹ Vladimir Putin. 2014. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’.” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*, October 24, 2014, At <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>, accessed November 11, 2019.

the Great Patriotic War heroes and that they protect the interests of Russia honorably.”⁷²

Thus, according to the narrative of the victorious nation, the Russian nation has, throughout its thousand-year-long history, had to defend itself against an external enemy, and has, since the triumph over the Polish invasion in the seventeenth century, always succeeded. The Great Patriotic War made the nation what it is today by unifying all Russians, regardless of their ethnicity, against the evil. But as international terrorism shows, the evil did not disappear, and peace is not self-preserving. This is why today’s generation needs to remember, respect, and defend the memory of the Great Victory. The generations of the past and the present share the same explicit character: they represent the “victorious nation” in a world that is constantly in a state of war between good and evil.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 remains to be portrayed as correcting a mistake of the past.⁷³ The majority of Russians perceive the annexation as a success, and after 2014, pride in the Russian military as well as the country’s influence in the world increased.⁷⁴ The state authorities have made extensive use of the Crimea motif. The first anniversary of the annexation was marked by a large, festive event called “We are together” (*My vmeste*) in Moscow,⁷⁵ and celebrations to mark the event have been organized annually since then. In 2019, Putin paid a visit to Simferopol’, where he stated that “the behavior of the Sevastopol’ and Crimean residents reminds me of the behavior of the Red Army soldiers in the tragic months of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War.”⁷⁶ In the president’s speech, honorable actions in the present day can best be emphasized by drawing parallels with the most heroic actions of all time: the wartime deeds of the Soviet army and the Soviet people. In this regard, it is also interesting that Putin uses the terms “Soviet army” and “our army” interchangeably.

In 2017, Russia celebrated the centenary of the October Revolution,

⁷² Vladimir Putin. 2016. “Voennyi parad na Krasnoi ploshchadi” [Military Parade on the Red Square]. *Kremlin.ru*. May 9, 2016, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51888>, accessed November 20, 2019.

⁷³ Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Vladimir Putin posetil Sevastopol’” [Vladimir Putin Visited Sevastopol’]. *Kremlin.ru*. March 14, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57063>, accessed November 20, 2019; see also Teper, “Official Russian Identity,” 383.

⁷⁴ Marharyta Fabrykant and Vladimir Magun. 2019. “Dynamics of National Pride Attitudes in Post-Soviet Russia, 1996–2015.” *Nationalities Papers*, 47:1: 20–37, 23–24.

⁷⁵ Vladimir Putin. 2015. “Kontsert, posvyashchennyi vossoedineniiu Kryma i Sevastopolia s Rossiei” [Concert Dedicated to the Unification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia]. *Kremlin.ru*. May 18, 2015, At <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/regions/CR/events/47878>, accessed September 16, 2019.

⁷⁶ Vladimir Putin. 2019. “Kontsert po sluchaiu pyatiletii vossoedineniia Kryma s Rossiei” [Concert for the Fifth Anniversary of the Unification of Crimea with Russia]. *Kremlin.ru*. March 18, 2019, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60096>, accessed September 16, 2019.

the memory of which, even if by no means “censored” (numerous exhibitions, books, and cultural events were dedicated to the revolution), proved difficult for the state leadership. Olga Malinova has explained that the Russian state cannot successfully build a new, consistent frame for the revolution because it completely rejects a “working through” of the traumas of the past.⁷⁷ In the material collected for this paper, the president mentioned the revolution⁷⁸ twice. The first mention came in 2016, when he declared that “Russian society in general needs an objective, honest and deep-reaching analysis of these events.”⁷⁹ The following year, Putin reminded the audience at the Valdai forum that the revolution had had both negative and positive consequences, calling for “gradual and consistent” evolution instead of “the destruction of statehood.”⁸⁰ A year later, on the same occasion, Putin was asked about growing demands for change within Russian society. In the spring of 2017, a video by oppositional politician Aleksey Navalnyi on Prime Minister Medvedev’s properties had triggered widespread protest against corruption, and in the summer of 2018, there had been significant demonstrations nationwide against the planned pension reform. Simultaneously, sociological surveys reported on growing discontent and hopes for change in domestic politics. Putin’s answer was blunt: people everywhere, including in Russia, want change, but not “revolutionary changes”: “We are fed up with the revolutions of the twentieth century, and we’ve had enough of revolutionary changes even in recent history.”⁸¹ Thus, the state discourse perceives revolution *per se* as undesired and politicizes its memory by connecting it to present reforms.

During the years 2012–2019, several policy decisions were taken to guard the “correct” interpretations of the past, demonstrating the increased significance of the narrative of the victorious nation. For example, the state authorities defined the limits of the accepted forms of remembering the Great Patriotic War. In May 2014, Putin signed a law penalizing the rehabilitation of Nazism, the public desecration of symbols of Russian military glory, or the spreading of disrespectful information about the country’s

⁷⁷ Olga Malinova. 2018. “The Embarrassing Centenary: Reinterpretation of the 1917 Revolution in the Official Historical Narrative of Post-Soviet Russia (1991–2017).” *Nationalities Papers* 46: 2: 272–89.

⁷⁸ One of the conceptual innovations regarding the event was the name “Great Russian Revolution 1917,” which encompasses both the Menshevik revolution in February and the socialist revolution in October.

⁷⁹ Vladimir Putin. 2016. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniui.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 1, 2016, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>, accessed November 11, 2019.

⁸⁰ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2017).

⁸¹ Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [The Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*. October 18, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848>, accessed November 20, 2019.

defense.⁸² The adoption of the law follows a logic that is pronounced in all state narratives:

This is our common history and we need to treat it with respect. [...] It is unacceptable to drag schisms, anger, resentment and bitterness of the past into our life today, and in pursuit of one's own political and other interests to speculate on tragedies that concerned practically every family in Russia, no matter what side of the barricades our forebears were on. Let's remember that we are a united people, one people, and we have one Russia (*my edinyi narod, my odin narod, i Rossiia u nas odna*).⁸³

Belonging to the nation, in this sense, means remembering and respecting the experiences of the shared past. In May 2018, Putin noted that there have been attempts to falsify history, but “we will not allow this [to happen].”⁸⁴ In the presidential discourse, remembering the past has a morally binding aspect: it is the duty and the moral obligation of today's people to recognize their position in the chain of generations before them. Thus does the narrative of the victorious nation connect to the idea of patriotic loyalty.

Russian history is one of the most significant and persistent sources of national pride.⁸⁵ For example, the Immortal Regiment event, which invites ordinary Russians to march on Victory Day with portraits of their relatives who took part in or were killed during the Great Patriotic War, has a positive public image. The narrative of the victorious nation seems to be intuitively accepted by the people, but the tendency of the state leadership to connect the narrative to the conflicts of today may complicate its reception in the future. If military actions cannot credibly be framed as “defensive and victorious,” popular support for them may decrease. Growing expenditures abroad may start to look bad if domestic socio-economic upgrades cannot be funded.

Narrative of the Moral Nation

Throughout his presidential career, Vladimir Putin has occasionally referred to the shared values of the Russian nation. As early as 2007, Putin considered “the spiritual unity of the people and the moral values that unite us” to be just as important as the country's political and economic

⁸² Ivan Kurilla. 2014. “The Implications of Russia's Law against the ‘Rehabilitation of Nazism.’” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 331 (August 2014), At http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/201408_Kurilla, accessed September 16, 2019.

⁸³ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2016).

⁸⁴ Putin, “Voennyi parad” (2018).

⁸⁵ Fabrykant and Magun, “Dynamics of National Pride,” 33.

stability.⁸⁶ However, the content of those “moral values” has been in flux in post-Soviet Russia. At the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term in 2012, the state had to answer to the fundamental challenge that the democracy demonstrations had posed. In the president’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2012, Putin announced a quest for “spiritual bonds” that would strengthen the country from within:

Today, Russian society experiences a clear deficit of spiritual bonds: mercy, compassion, support and mutual assistance—a deficit of things that have always, at all times, made us stronger and more powerful, things that we have always been proud of.⁸⁷

In Putin’s parlance at the time, spiritual bonds were needed to increase societal stability. The following year, Putin began to emphasize the “traditional” features of the “national code.”⁸⁸ This new emphasis in the presidential discourse signaled the state leadership’s desire to speak to the more conservative part of Russian society. The president’s belief that there was a “deficit” of spiritual bonds among Russians has, since 2013, transformed into a claim that Russians as a nation embrace traditional spiritual-moral values (*dukhovno-nravstvennye tsennosti*).⁸⁹ In 2014, traditional values began to be cemented in key policy documents. The Strategy on National Security, confirmed by the president on December 31, 2015, explains that:

Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values include the priority of the spiritual over the material, protection of human life and of human rights and freedoms, the family, creative labor, service to the homeland, the norms of morals and morality, humanism, charity, fairness, mutual assistance, collectivism, the historical unity of the peoples of Russia, and the continuity of our motherland’s history.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Vladimir Putin. 2007. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu” [Annual Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*, April 26, 2007, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203>, accessed May 5, 2020.

⁸⁷ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

⁸⁸ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013); Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2013).

⁸⁹ Putin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta” (2014); Putin, “Priem po sluchaiu” (2019); Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2018).

⁹⁰ 2015. *Strategiia natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation], At <http://www.rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>, accessed November 11, 2019, Article 78.

The presidential discourse portrays shared conservative values as the natural basis of the Russian nation and, in so doing, stresses the rights of the majority over the minority.⁹¹ In this way, a narrative supposed to enhance national unity simultaneously draws lines within the country by identifying the Others of the nation. In addition to the Strategy on National Security, the Foundations of State Cultural Policy applies the concept by stating that civil society is held together by shared values,⁹² suggesting that those who do not accept traditional values are not included in society.

In the president's discourse, the shared traditional values of the nation—in particular “spirituality” and patriotism—have a strong backward-looking orientation. They enabled Russia's survival after the Time of Troubles, in the Great Patriotic War, and in the face of the very real threat of civil war in the early 1990s.⁹³ Thus, the narrative of moral nation is mutually reinforcing with the idea of victorious nation: it portrays the ideals for which the Russian people have struggled over the course of centuries. In the present day, patriotism has acquired yet another aspect in the presidential speech: it serves as a precondition for criticism in the political debate⁹⁴ and as a consolidating basis for national politics.⁹⁵ Putin has also called patriotism the only possible “uniting idea” of the Russian nation.⁹⁶ In 2016, he described patriotism in this sense as a success, stating that “our people have united around patriotic values.”⁹⁷ In the state discourse, patriotism means loyalty to the state and readiness to act for its benefit. But an expectation of patriotism from all Russians creates unity at the expense of those who remain critical of the state. Framing political opposition as non-patriotic serves to rhetorically exclude political opponents from the nation.

Another group excluded from “Russianness” on the basis of shared values are sexual and gender minorities. In presidential speeches, direct references to the topic have been rare, even though traditional family values are often stressed. In September 2013, Putin lamented that the West

⁹¹ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013); Vladimir Putin. 2015. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*, October 22, 2015, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>, accessed September 16, 2019.

⁹² 2014. *Osnovy gosudarstvennoi kul'turnoi politiki* [The Foundations of State Cultural Policy], At <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d526a877638a8730eb.pdf>, accessed November 20, 2019.

⁹³ Putin, “Priem po sluchaiu” (2019); Vladimir Putin. 2019. “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [The Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*, October 3, 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>, accessed November 11, 2019.

⁹⁴ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

⁹⁵ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

⁹⁶ “U nas net i ne mozhet byt' nikakoi drugoi obediniaushchei idei, krome patriotizma” [We Don't Have and There Cannot Be Any Uniting Idea Except Patriotism]. *Kommersant*. February 3, 2016, At <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2907316>, accessed November 20, 2019.

⁹⁷ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2016).

denies traditional “national, cultural, religious and even gender (*polovoi*)” identities when conducting policies that put big families and same-sex relations, as well as “faith in God and faith in Satan,” on the same level. On the same occasion, however, Putin denied that Russia would disrespect any rights of sexual minorities,⁹⁸ even though he had recently signed a federal law that prohibited the dissemination of “gay propaganda” to minors, effectively making it impossible for sexual minorities to put forward any positive public message.⁹⁹ Today, the question has taken on an international aspect: conservative circles in Russia use the imagery of gay pride and same-sex marriages as evidence of the moral decay of the West, while gay activists plead their cases to the European Court of Human Rights.

Since 2013 in particular, the presidential discourse has emphasized traditional values not only as the consolidating basis of Russian society, but as a global dividing-line. That year, Putin lamented in front of the Valdai forum that Euro-Atlantic countries reject their roots, “including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization.” This “abandonment of moral principles” has led to a situation in which many people in the West “are embarrassed or afraid to talk about their religious affiliations.”¹⁰⁰ Putin suggests that the spiritual-moral values pursued by Russia are widely supported abroad,¹⁰¹ but he stresses that Russia does not impose its values on others. This interpretation leans on a key concept in Putin’s foreign policy, national sovereignty: Putin has explained pursuing sovereignty as “an intrinsic part of national character.”¹⁰² In 2018, Putin stated that Russians value their sovereignty and independence, and added: “It has always been this way, at all times in the history of our state. It runs in the blood of our people.”¹⁰³ The narratives of the moral and victorious nation share common ground in the idea of the world being in a state of “disorder.” In 2014 and 2015, the narrative of Russians as a moral nation developed into a more ideological one, as the political tension between Russia and the West grew. For example, the anti-terrorist operation in Syria was portrayed as a moral responsibility that Russia was prepared to take on when other countries were not.¹⁰⁴

In 2015, Putin explained the internal dynamism between the traditional religions in Russia by saying that Russia’s strength lies in “mutual respect and dialogue between the Orthodox, Muslims, and followers of

⁹⁸ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

⁹⁹ “Putin podpisal zakon o zaprete gei-propagandy sredi detei” [Putin Signed the Law Banning Gay Propaganda among Children]. *RIA Novosti*. June 30, 2013, At <https://ria.ru/20130630/946660179.html>, accessed November 20, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

¹⁰¹ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2013).

¹⁰² Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

¹⁰³ Putin, “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba” (2018).

¹⁰⁴ Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2015).

Judaism and Buddhism,” but the Orthodox faith has a special role due to its importance in Russian history.¹⁰⁵ After the “conservative turn” in particular, the political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church has increased, which adds weight to the emphasis on spirituality (*dukhovnost*) as an explicit characteristic of the nation. Because the Church enjoys relatively high popular support, the state benefits from the support it gets from Church representatives and makes political concessions to them in return.

Until around 2014, the president preferred “spirituality” to concepts like “religion” or “Orthodoxy,” in order not to contradict the narrative of the multinational (and multiconfessional) nation on the rhetorical level. However, as mentioned above, Putin broke this pattern in his speeches concerning the annexation of Crimea, making clear references to Orthodoxy as a uniting feature of the nation.¹⁰⁶ Using Bacon’s terminology, I suggest that the emphasis on Orthodox faith serves as a subplot within the narrative of the spiritual nation: it enables the President to stress “holy” and “sacred” meanings that speak strongly to those who identify themselves as (culturally) Orthodox. Thus, the narrative of the moral nation rests on a hierarchy where Orthodoxy is the primary form of spirituality. Representatives of other traditional religions are included as long as they themselves commit to traditional values, but the “spirituality” of non-traditional religious communities does not belong to the “Russianness” of the presidential discourse.¹⁰⁷ On a conceptual level, reinforcing traditional values has politicized the term “non-traditional,” which has become a negative attribute in itself.

Labelling specific societal activities, politics, and identities as “non-traditional” in the presidential discourse marginalizes parts of the society and excludes them from the definition of “Russianness.” In other words, embracing traditional values has become a prerequisite of belonging to the Russian nation. Yet the state discourse on traditional values reveals little about state leadership’s commitment to those values, limiting them as a source of state legitimacy. For example, the state leadership stresses “spiritual values over material ones” but cannot provide a credible answer to accusations of corruption. The emphasis on “spirituality” in this officially secular country, as well as the concessions made to the Russian Orthodox Church in the legislative sphere, have also sparked criticism. Moreover, the narrative of the moral nation complicates public discussion of problems related to sexuality and family life: Russian schools do not provide sexual education, public campaigns against HIV have an

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Putin. 2015. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*, December 3, 2015, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864>, accessed September 16, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Putin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta” (2014).

¹⁰⁷ An example of repressive policies toward non-traditional religious communities was the disbanding of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia in 2017.

over-sensitive tone, and domestic violence is not taken seriously by the legislative authorities.

Concluding Remarks: Main Narratives of the Nation and Their Future

The Russian state leadership formulates its nationalistic argument with three overlapping and interconnected narratives, which together describe a Russian nation that is and always has been multinational and that embraces “spiritual-moral” values. These characteristics have been tested in conflicts throughout the course of Russian history, but the nation has remained unified and defended its traditional values, and is therefore a victorious nation.

The narrative of the multinational nation functioned first to manage inter-ethnic tensions within Russian society. But especially after 2013, it came to mark Russia’s historical difference from Western multiculturalism. In the light of the material presented in this article, I argue that the discursive shift following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was not as permanent as some scholars have suggested; rather, it can be seen as having revitalized an pre-existing ethnically motivated subplot within the narrative of Russians as a multinational nation. After 2016, the ambiguity acquired yet another aspect: the president stresses multinationality as a historical characteristic of the nation, on the one hand, and primacy of ethnic Russianness on the other hand, while encouraging the distinctively civic language of legislative amendments on the Russian nation.

The narrative of the moral nation recognizes both internal and external Others: it perceives traditional, “spiritual-moral” values as the core of national unity, and these values divide not only Russia, but the entire world, into “us” and “them.” In this view, Russia acts globally as the guardian of traditional values, whereas the Other dwells in moral decay. Since 2015, in particular, the parallels between past generations and the nation today have been reinforced. The President’s discourse likened the Soviet military to the one fighting against terrorism in Syria or parading on Red Square. Moreover, he emphasized that the memory of the past is “alive” and needs to be defended against “falsifications”—a concern to which the Kremlin is increasingly attentive. The narrative of the victorious nation argues that the generations of today have a moral obligation to follow the example of generations of the past, most importantly the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. All the narratives have a strong historical orientation: conflicts in the past have consolidated the Russian nation against an external enemy.

As has been presented above, none of these narratives of “Russianness” is novel as such; in fact, many of the explicit characteristics of the nation have been re-employed from Russian and Soviet history.

Yet their intensity in the state discourse and the way in which they were consolidated in 2012–2013 make them significant now. After 2014, as international tensions grew into a direct conflict, the narratives helped to explain the fundamental differences between Russia and “the West,” and all of them were used to justify of the annexation of Crimea.

In 2017–2019, the patriotic “boost” among the population began to wear off and domestic challenges to state legitimacy became more pronounced in various protests across Russia. Going forward, the political leadership will face increasing pressure to adjust the nationalist argument once again. First, the view of the traditional values as the uniting force of the nation has already been challenged. Second, by aiming to unite people through the narrative of moral and traditional nation, the state leadership simultaneously creates and preserves division lines *within* Russian society. Certain societal problems have also become difficult to address in the official discourse, as according to the main narratives these problems should not even exist. Third, some parts of the narratives contradict the legislative basis of the Russian Federation. Elevating “spirituality” as an explicit characteristic of the nation calls into question the secularity of the state, while the view that patriotism is a “unifying idea” for the people challenges the provision of the 1993 Constitution stating that Russia cannot have a state ideology. In January 2020, it became clear that the state leadership seeks to settle these contradictions by revising the Constitution instead of molding these narratives of the nation: the constitutional amendments announced by Putin reinforce, for instance, faith in God as a unifying factor for the nation, as well as Russia’s role in protecting the historical truth.¹⁰⁸

Having portrayed the Russian nation with these interlinked narratives for several years, the political leadership may find it difficult to turn away from them. In recent years, the state authorities have reinforced the morally binding aspects of the narratives and even adjusted some state policies accordingly. But even with the new, ideologically reinforced Constitution, challenges to the state’s legitimacy remain.

¹⁰⁸ 2020. *Polnyi tekst popravok v Konstitutsiiu: za chto my golosuem?* [Full Text of the Constitutional Amendments: On What Are We Voting?], At <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48045/>, accessed May 10, 2020.